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## OUR GROCERY-NEWSPAPER SYSTEM OF TEACHING WRITING

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In a small town that I used to know, the village grocer was also the village editor. After he got through measuring potatoes and weighing sugar, he would go across the alley to his print shop and write four or five locals, then hasten back to the store to see that no customer was depleting the cracker barrel and no clerk selling four and an eighth pounds of country butter for the price of four.

We used to think that it wasn't much of a grocery store, and it wasn't, but the paper was worse. Its dreary columns droned about month-old society events and barked fatuously at the heels of the opposing political party. Most of us would as soon have confined our reading to the wall paper. We all concluded, those of us who went into journalism, those of us who went into the grocery business, even those of us who went into teaching, that somehow the grocery business and the newspaper profession do not mix.

Strangely enough, however, those of us who have learned how journalism and other forms of professional writing must be taught, according to the present systems in vogue in colleges and universities, know that educational institutions have not yet reached the conclusions which we reached in Hilkinsville many years ago. It is true that newspaper work and the grocery business are not mixed in college, but this is only because newspaper work has reached a plane of partial respectability in the curricula while the grocery business for some reason has not. The man or woman who is studying journalism spends fifty minutes listening to a lecture on writing. He then rushes over to the classroom of the professor of history, who quizzes him for another three-quarters of an hour on the Age of Pericles. He gets back to the practice room of the

journalism department, ready to start writing the news story the material for which he picked up last night. It is a long story, and he has it three-fourths done when the bell rings.

"I'm awfully sorry, Professor," he exclaims, "but I've got to go to French class. The college paper's got to have this story this afternoon. Maybe Bill will finish it up. Here's the idea"—and he rattles out a list of details that the professor can't half catch, let alone tell them to Bill.

So it goes every day. Running a grocery and a newspaper is not half so hard work, not half so fruitless, as trying to learn to write professionally and to learn history, French, economics, and two or three other subjects at the same time.

The situation is just the same if the student is trying to learn to write the play, the short story, or the informal essay. His mind is on half a dozen other subjects, which a throng of professors assures him are of equal importance. What professional writer of the short story or the play spends three-fourths of his time mulling about in remote subjects in which he has only a casual interest? What professional writer works at the carpenter's trade or practices law, or does anything else than write? Professional writers know that they must give their minds, their hearts, their lives, to their writing, and that nothing else can be permitted to break in.

The grocery-newspaper system of teaching journalism and other forms of professional writing is what has brought college training in these subjects into disrepute. Schools of journalism are doing as well as they can under the system foisted upon them by the academic majority in university faculties. Young men and women go out from schools of journalism with much better qualifications for newspaper work than young men and women who have never studied the subject; but this is not very convincing. It is like comparing the graduate of a school of fine arts with the young man who never had a brush in his hand except to make a few daubs in grammar school or high school. Newspapers complain that the graduates of schools of journalism lack some of the practical essentials of the profession. It is not the fault of the schools of journalism; they have not been permitted to give their students that intensive training which is so much needed.

When one considers the young man or woman who has specialized, or attempted to specialize, in other forms of writing in college, the situation is much worse. Generally speaking, he cannot sell his material. He tries, and tries, with little result. If he is persistent enough, he probably comes into contact with some editor kind enough to tell him where the trouble lies.

"You lack practice principally," comments the editor. "You have done too little concentrated work in writing. Nor do you have the technique of modern writing clearly enough in mind."

And so the young writer goes back to practice, by himself, what he should have practiced under a trained instructor, hour after hour, day after day, in college. Finally, if he has the stuff in him, he makes good—perhaps five years later than would have been the case if he had had hard, systematic training in college. And he says, truthfully, as many excellent writers have recently said, "What I know about writing, I learned outside of college."

What is the remedy? The first thing to do is to segregate the students who want to make writing their profession from those who do not want to do so. Let the doll-faced, embroidered-stockinged morons who worship at the saccharine shrine of Professor Cyril Waterbury stay with Cyril, and may the Lord grant him grace to teach them something. Likewise let the well-tailored youths from the Gold Coast of every college continue to patronize the teachers whom they fittingly characterize as "good old sports." They can perhaps be taught to compose a business letter (they will dictate it in later life to a secretary who has studied spelling) and can probably be impressed with the fact that Rousseau is neither a cigarette nor a cheese. But, in the name of all that matters in writing, don't put into these groups the youths who really want to write. Let them visit these classes now and then if they want to, to get local color for their short stories or their essays or their news stories, but don't make them a part of any such continuous vaudeville.

The segregation should be made as early in the student's career as possible. The longer the student with real literary ability is held back by the presence of literary dunces in his classes, the later will be his entrance into the field of professional writing. As soon as

he gets into a class composed only of students of his own kind, the stimulus of association and competition will begin to work, and he will be able to make rapid advances in at least the mechanics of writing.

It may be urged against this plan that a student is often unable, early in his career, to state whether he intends to write professionally or not and that the segregation would therefore be impossible. It is practicable, however, to select those who have the combination of real literary ability and real interest in writing; those are the persons who it is fair to suppose may undertake a literary career. At any rate, they cannot be harmed by studying together the principles of writing, whether they later go into the profession of writing or not.

This segregation, however, is to be merely a preparation for more intensive work later on. These students will advance as far as they can in writing, while at the same time they pursue other school and college subjects. At a set time in the college course, however, let all other subjects than those directly associated with writing be dropped, and let the student spend a year or two years or three years—whatever time is decided to be necessary—in definitely learning to write.

If the student plans to be a journalist, let him work in the journalism department steadily every day of the week. If the instructor gives him an assignment, there will be no French or economics class to serve as a reason—or an excuse—why the assignment is not covered. The instructor can tell him what's wrong with the story as soon as he brings it in. The instructor can go over it with him, changing a word here, putting in a little "punch" there, adding a bit of humor in another place. The student will be constantly writing every type of journalistic composition—news, feature stories, editorials. He will get a chance to do copyreading and to help make up the college daily. He can write special copy for out-of-town papers. There will be occasional lectures by members of the faculty or by visiting newspaper men on writing and on the ethical and other problems of the profession of journalism. The student's interest will be centered in journalism every hour of the day. When he gets through a year or two of that

sort of practice, he will have had some real training in journalism.

A similar system may be followed with students who plan to do professional writing of other types. Most such students will probably find it wise to spend some time in the journalism department. Thereafter, however, they will take up the essay, the short story, the novel, the play, or whatever other form of writing particularly appeals to them. More than one form of writing may wisely be undertaken by most students. In any case, the student's attention will be fixed wholly on his writing.

To make intensive training in writing successful, however, it must be carried on under the direction of men and women who can write matter acceptable to publishers and who have some *flair* for teaching. In spite of opinions to the contrary, such men are available. Competent, even distinguished newspaper men have accepted positions in schools of journalism. Robert Frost and other authors have been willing to undertake teaching. There is probably no well-known type of writing, competent practitioners of which could not be obtained for college teaching.

The system may seem unusual. It is unusual—but only because many educators lack a real conception of what writing is. From different standpoints, writing may be regarded as a craft, a profession, or a fine art. For the professional writer, it can be nothing else than one of these three. Whichever it is considered to be, the system outlined is the one which bears the sanction of practical, successful use in kindred activities. Blacksmithing is a craft. The prospective blacksmith does one of two things. He works as an apprentice to a trained blacksmith, or he takes a short course in blacksmithing in some school. While he is learning his craft, he is not studying carpentry or glazing or printing or anything else—he is studying blacksmithing and blacksmithing alone. A course in law—one of the oldest of the professions—comprises only the study of law. Physiology, educational psychology, Spanish, are never thought of as component parts of the course. If one proposed them to the dean of the college of law, one would be laughed at. I have examined the curricula of a number of schools which teach painting, universally conceded to be a fine art, and I do not find

domestic science, zoölogy, literature, or any similar subjects required. The students devote their time to painting and to subjects directly and obviously associated with painting.

Moreover, the vocational section of the Students' Army Training Corps, which operated during the war, taught one thing if nothing else—that intensive training in one line of work will bring results hitherto thought utterly impossible. Men who had been tailors were taught to be competent blacksmiths within three months. Office workers learned the intricate mechanism of the automobile. Intensive training worked wherever it was tried. The reasons intensive training has not been given to the prospective writer are found in two prevalent opinions. One is that it requires no particular training to learn to write—that writing is something which anyone can easily pick up. This is the attitude of those who sneer at practical courses in writing and urge students instead to elect work in the medieval drama or the eighteenth-century essay. The other opinion is quite at the opposite pole. It holds that skill in writing is a gift of God, to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be subtracted. I met a proponent of this view recently at a meeting of teachers. She assured me with tears in her voice that writing, except on its purely mechanical side, could never be taught, that it was the product of inspiration, “a divine afflatus,” she said, “which falls only here and there upon a fortunate head.”

It is a recognized fact that the teaching of writing is not on a plane with the teaching of painting, the teaching of law, or even the teaching of blacksmithing. Nor will it be until foolish notions about writing are discarded, at least by members of college faculties, and educators adopt the sensible principles of early segregation of students who want to do professional writing and their later intensive training under competent writers. Until these steps are taken, no student can look to a college or university to teach him writing as effectively as it teaches other crafts, professions, or arts.